

Ashes of Empire.

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

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ASHES OF EMPIRE.
Behind black ramparts where an angry sun
Burned in ashes smolders all the West,
Against a sky of fire I see the crest
Of battered Cathedrals, hewn on gun.

A towered Cathedral burns athwart the
ray,
A maze of windows kindle in the blaze,
Chimney and dome and belfry, one by one,
Kedden to cinders through the crimson haze.

Gleaming shadows fall on roof and wall,
Black shapes of shade, fantastic, wax and
fade,
Graded by the phantom day is laid,
Where night's pale sister, twilight, smooths
the pall.

The double-battered din of shotted guns,
Humbles, resounds, rolling from fort to fort;
Priming the cannon gloom, from port to
port
The fretted lightning of the cannon runs.

Ashes of years of sin, the sacrifice,
Ashes of oaths and vows and prayers and
lies,
Ashes of fool and knave and worldly wise,
Ashes of empire under ashen skies.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLACIT OF THE EMPRESS.

The throng outside the palace had swelled to menacing proportions, the gay crowd of heads, threatening the packed square with double strands of color. The throng was not yet a mob, there were no rushes, no sudden retreats, no capricious stampedes, but it grew dense. Again and again the Imperial police pushed into the square only to be crushed back against the park railings by the sheer weight of the people. From the river a battalion of moustache Mobils advanced, singing a deep swaying chorus through which the treble voices of the newswomen soared piercingly: "Extra! Extra! Fearful disaster in the north. Defeat of the French army at Sedan! Capture of the emperor! Surrender of the army of Chalons! Terrible battle at Sedan! Extra! Extra!"

Across the bridge, the Imperial guard, against the Palace Bourbon, receding and vanishing, retreating, only to dash back again on the steel-barbed grille, a deluge of eager human beings, a chaos of white, tense faces and outstretched hands. And now over all swept a whirlwind of sound—of splendid colorful song—the "Marseillaise!"

The crowd had become a mob. The Empire was at an end.

A short, fierce blow broke from the crowd which filled the Rue de Rivoli, from the Louvre to the Place de la Concorde, an officer of the Imperial guard appeared for a moment on the terrace above the Orangery and attempted to speak. "Go back! Go back!" shouted the mob. "Down with the empire! Long live the republic! The emperor has betrayed Paris! Shame! Shame!"

Somebody in the crowd raised a glided wooden stick on a fragment of broken flagstaff and shook it derisively at the emperor. "Down with the empire! Long live the republic! The emperor has betrayed Paris! Shame! Shame!"

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up, glittering with orders, ashen and spurred, his face crimson with anger.

"In well, he shouted, shaking his clenched fist at the crowd. "It is well for you that my gracious majesty commands that not one drop of blood shall be spilled to protect this palace! Go back to your kennels! The empress is leaving the palace!"

He walked his splendid bay mare straight up to the shattered gate, a straw in the hair, and he looked at the crowd with a cold, steady eye.

"You, gentlemen," he said violently, "are here on a vile errand. Are you not blushing for your uniform, Captain Flourens? And you, M. Victorien Sardou, with your clay mask of a face, and you Armand Gouzien?"

For a second rage choked him.

"What do you want of me, gentlemen?" he asked, controlling his passion with an effort. "I have made a promise, and you will find that I will keep it. If General Trochu has deserted the empress, make the emperor know it. Let God deal with him. For me, I am here to stay. Say so to your mob."

At this moment a roar arose from the crowd outside. The empress had fled. The empress is gone! To the palace! To the palace! The empress is gone!

The crowd started forward. Then, as the soldiers in the courtyard saw the emperor charge, the people fell back, crushing and trampling in their hurry to regain the pavement.

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cab door and sprang to the other side of the horse. "Now, Bourke," he said, "touch up your heels."

"Bourke uttered another awful threat and signaled the cabby. The latter obeyed with a despairing grimace and the horse moved off along the quay, the two young fellows walking on either side of the horse's head.

In a moment they were in the crowd that surrounded the gate of the Carrousel, but the crowd was not very compact and they threaded their way slowly, amid cheering and singing and savage yells. "Death, death to the empress!"

"That's the empress!" said Harwood. "Hang those magnanimous cutthroats! Go slowly, Bourke. Hello! what's up now?"

From the staircase of the south colonnade of the Louvre a group of ladies and gentlemen were issuing. Hurriedly they traversed the court to the street gate, where a mob of loungers stood, staring up at the gray facade. As one of the party, a lady, heavily veiled in crepe, stepped out to the sidewalk, a gamine clinging to the gate piped up shrilly:

"That's the empress!"

Instantly one of the gentlemen in attendance seized the urchin by one ear and boxed the other soundly, saying: "I'll teach you to shout 'Vive la France!'"

For a moment the knot of ladies laughed. Then someone in the crowd said distinctly: "All the same, that is the empress."

A silence followed, broken by a single voice, low, but perfectly distinct: "Death to the empress!"

There was a restless movement, a quick pressing forward of wicked faces, a shuffle of heavy shoes. In a second the crowd doubled itself as if by magic voices rose, harsh and ominous. Somebody struck the iron railing with a steel-barred club. Bourke, standing close to the gutter by the cab, felt the door pushed outward and he turned alarmed at both young girls sprang out. One of them ran to the empress and motioned toward the cab.

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silence. Life was very pleasant at times—when lighted by a pair of deep hazel eyes.

"What?" wondered Bourke. "Nothing," said the girl, now also greatly agitated, joined in the jackdaw croaked and chattered, the finches, thrushes and canaries chorused a shrill treble. A young monkey in a corner set up an ear-piercing shriek and a red squirrel rushed madly around in his wire wheel.

The mouse was amused. With snobs and gibes and jeering gestures he excited the parrot; he made awful faces at the monkey until the latter creature clung to the cage with his teeth.

Presently, however, he tired of the sport; he ceased to tease the monkey and the parrot; he pressed his pitted face closer to the glass, with now and then a rapid sideling glance peculiar to the chevalier of industry.

There was nobody in the outer shop, that was clear. There seemed to be nothing to steal there, either. The mouse did not consider the high stooling still nobly seemed to be about, and it was the instinct of the mouse to rummage. He withdrew from the window, assured himself that the street was deserted, and then he crept silently around to the open door and entered.

As he set his worn shoes upon the threshold the feathers on the parrot's neck flattened in alarm, the monkey crouched trembling, and a corner of his cage, every bird became mute and motionless.

For a minute the mouse peered about the shop. The squirrel still scrambled madly on his wheel and the narrow eye of the mouse followed the whirling spokes.

There was a closed door at the further end of the room; the mouse fixed his eyes upon it and stepped softly across the floor, one hand outstretched toward the knob.

When he had it in his hand he paused, listening, then he turned and handled in silence. Instantly something moved on the other side—something heavy and soft—the door was pushed open with a steady, restless pressure that forced the mouse back flat against the wall.

It was then that the mouse, peeping over his shoulder, felt his blood freeze and his shabby knees give way. For staring up into his face stood a full-grown lioness with her brilliant eyes fixed on his. He would have shrieked if he could, but terror paralyzed him. He felt that he was going to swoon.

Suddenly there came the sound of voices, a distant door opened, steps echoed across a tiled hallway, and two girls entered the shop. The further room. The lioness turned her head at the sound, hesitated, glanced back at the mouse, and finally snatched hastily away, only to be seized and held by one of the girls, while the other alternately slapped, cuffed and kissed her.

"Scherezade ought to be slapped instead of kissed," cried the taller girl, shoving the anxious and doleful lioness toward the door. "Really, Yvette, you call her! Come, day show'll run out into the street, and then they'll shoot her!"

"Poor darling," said Yvette, "she didn't mean to be naughty. Somebody must have left the door open—Scherezade can't turn the knob, you know." As she spoke, she laid one hand on the neck of the lioness.

"The lioness," said the shorter girl, "is a great creature toward the inner room, calling back to her sister: 'Hilde, dear, shut the door!'"

"I've come to shut it on Scherezade," said Hilde, "she's frightened the birds and animals nearly to death. Our squirrel is going mad, I believe."

The parrot clamored at its perch, and she went over to quiet it, talking all the while.

"Poor little Mehmet Ali, did the little lion frighten him? There! There! And poor little Roscoe, too! Turn toward the silver monkey. 'It's a perfect shame—it is, indeed!'"

"Hilde! Do shut the door!" exclaimed Yvette from the inner room. "I'm going to give Scherezade her ball to play with and then I'll come out."

Hilde gave one last pat to the parrot's head and went toward the door. As she laid her hand on the knob her eyes encountered a pair of dusky, flat shoes, protruding beneath the silk. The shoes covered the feet of the mouse, and she threw back the door with a startled exclamation, the mouse himself stood revealed, terribly haggard from the effects of his recent flight, but now sufficiently recovered to bound with much agility into the street.

"What are you doing here?" stammered Hilde, following him to the outer door.

"I," said the mouse, recovering his composure a little and crossing one foot before the other, "I, mademoiselle, am an authorized agent for the public defense."

"You are soliciting subscriptions, why did you not ring the doorbell or knock?" asked Hilde, as Yvette entered and stood at her side.

"Why? Tell the truth," said the mouse, bowing impudently. "I only intended to ask for a match. I knocked politely as I was taught to do in my youth, but—"

"If you please, my son, go away!" interrupted Yvette quickly.

"I have the honor," said the mouse, removing his gray, peaked cap with a flourish and smoothing the levelled plaits over each ear. "I have the honor to obey. Always at the service of ladies—always devoted!" he flourished his pipe with dignity, "although I had hoped for the small courtesy of a match."

"Hilde," whispered Yvette, "he will go away if you give him a match."

Hilde stepped to the counter, found a card of matches and returned with a single match. The mouse's small eyes followed every expression on the two girls' faces. He took the match and, after a moment's hesitation, continued impudently: "Ladies, the present unfortunate condition of public affairs, in the face of a revolution which, within a week, has changed the government of France from an empire to a republic, has made the impending advance of the Prussian armies and the ultimate investment of the city of Paris my first duty to solicit a small contribution for the purpose of aiding the patriotic fund, destined to arm the fortifications with new and improved breech-loading cannon."

He glanced from Hilde to Yvette, his wary eye narrowing to a slit.

"I don't believe he's an agent," whispered Hilde, "don't give him anything."

Yvette drew a small purse from her gown and looked at the mouse with sincere eyes.

"Will you really give it to the public defense?" she asked. "Or—if you are hungry and need it for yourself—"

"Don't do it," murmured Hilde; "he is not honest."

The mouse's eyes filled with tears, his lips quivered.

"Honesty is often clothed in rags," he stammered, drawing himself up. "I thank you for your courtesy. I'll take it."

He moved away, furtively brushing a tear from his cheek. Yvette stepped across the threshold and touched his ragged elbow impulsively. He turned with a dramatic air, accepted the small silver coin, then stalked across the street, his head on his breast, his arms folded. Presently the stalk relaxed into a walk, then into a shuffle, then into a slouch. The sunshine lay warm on the grassy fortifications; where it lay warmest the mouse crept on down and crossed his legs. When he had lighted his pipe he stretched out at full length, both arms behind his head, cap tilted to shade his single eye. The sun glimmered on the cap he could see the pipe smoke curl.

long, yellow road, stretching way into the country from the Porte Rouge. Out there somewhere perhaps very far, perhaps very near, the Prussian armies were moving across France toward Paris. The thought amused the mouse. He scratched one large ear and proceeded to smoke his pipe. Prussians would come bombardment, with their Prussians would come panic, with panic might come anarchy, and with anarchy would come pillage.

The mouse snatched his pipe over the pipe stem. He reflected that the revolution, accomplished five days previous, had brought with it no plunder so far as he was concerned. It had been a stupid revolution, shouting, jostling the bourgeoisie, a rush at the Tuilleries, a whisk over the head from the Prussian army, and then the Prussians would come bombardment, with their Prussians would come panic, with panic might come anarchy, and with anarchy would come pillage.

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